

Russia looted items at Chernobyl's labs

The Washington Post

CHERNOBYL, Ukraine — Six hundred ninety-eight computers. 344 vehicles. 1,500 radiation dosimeters. Irreplaceable software. Almost every piece of firefighting equipment.

The list of what Russia's occupying forces stole, blew up or riddled with bullets in and around Chernobyl's laboratories is still being compiled.

While the catastrophe that many feared has been avoided — war unleashing radiation across the region from the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986 — officials at the Chernobyl plant are taking stock of Russia's capricious and chaotic month here, in which nine of their colleagues were killed and five were kidnapped.

"I cannot say that they have caused damage to mankind, but certainly great economic damage to Ukraine," said Mykola Bespaly, 58, director of the site's Central Analytical Laboratory, sitting in a lecture hall defaced by Russian graffiti.

The enormous nuclear station in Chernobyl no longer produces power, but before the invasion nearly 6,000 workers still monitored the lasting effects of the disastrous meltdown more than three decades ago, as well as processing spent nuclear fuel from other plants in Ukraine and Eu-

rope.

Located just a few miles from the Belarusian border, Chernobyl was one of the first places occupied by Russian troops. Yevhen Kramarenko, the director of the "exclusion zone" — a thousand-square-mile area where radiation levels remain high and public access is limited — said that on the first day of the invasion, a Russian general presented himself as the new leader of the station, and introduced employees from Rosatom, Russia's state nuclear agency.

"I believe that at the time when they came," Kramarenko said, "they planned to be there permanently, they planned to take control for a long time."

In the days before the invasion, all but a few hundred employees were evacuated. Those who stayed worked shifts lasting hundreds of hours under Russian supervision, often not resting for days while trying to keep the station safe and systems running.

Meanwhile, the station's equipment and information were being systematically stolen or destroyed, said Kramarenko. Now that he's back in charge, he's been checking on some of the stolen equipment that had been fitted with GPS trackers. Some are still transmitting location data.

"We see that part of it is located on the territory of Belarus, along the border. And

part moves around the territory of Belarus — Gomel, Minsk, other places," he said.

All in all, he estimates the cost of replacing what was lost at more than \$135 million. The software, however, was custom-made for the station and is irreplaceable. Bespaly said some of his laboratory's most important work — monitoring radiation levels across the exclusion zone for signs of spikes — is nearly impossible without it.

"Now it is not possible to provide reliable information, whether the equipment is in working condition or not, because there is no software," he said. "The Russians will not be able to use it because the software is unique, made specially for our devices."

A few technicians have returned to work. They showed visiting reporters videos on their phones taken as they reentered their workplaces and found them in complete shambles, narrating with shock and grief each newly discovered piece of destroyed equipment.

Over the coming months, Bespaly expects work to slowly gather steam again, though a full restoration won't happen until martial law is lifted. For now, officials are working on better evacuation plans in case of another invasion. Russian troops have begun building up a presence again along the border near Chernobyl, and Belarusian troops have bolstered their positions, too.

Gunman kills 4 in shooting at Okla. medical building

Associated Press

A man who blamed his surgeon for continuing pain after a recent back operation bought an AR-style rifle and opened fire hours later at a Tulsa, Okla., medical office, killing the doctor and three other people in an attack that ended with him taking his own life, police said Thursday.

The gunman called the clinic repeatedly complaining of pain and specifically targeted the doctor who performed the surgery, Tulsa Police Chief Wen-

dell Franklin said.

That physician, Dr. Preston Phillips, was killed Wednesday, along with another doctor, a receptionist and a patient. The attack occurred on the campus of Saint Francis Health System in Tulsa.

It was the latest in a series of mass shootings in United States including the deadly school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, and an attack on a supermarket in Buffalo, N.Y.

The gunman in Tulsa carried a letter that said he was targeting

Phillips, Franklin said. The letter "made it clear that he came in with the intent to kill Dr. Phillips and anyone who got in his way," Franklin said. "He blamed Dr. Phillips for the ongoing pain following the surgery."

Dr. Cliff Robertson, president and CEO of Saint Francis Health System, called Phillips a "consummate gentleman" and "a man that we should all strive to emulate." He said the three employees who were killed were "the three best people in the entire world" and that they "didn't

deserve to die this way."

Police believe the gunman bought his weapons legally, Franklin said. The shooter bought an AR-style semi-automatic rifle on the afternoon of the shooting and a handgun on Sunday, the police chief said.

Oklahoma House Democrats on Thursday called for a special session to consider gun safety legislation, but that's unlikely to happen in a GOP-controlled Legislature that has been pushing for years to loosen firearms restrictions.

Coast Guard welcomes female commandant

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Wednesday presided over the Coast Guard's change-of-command ceremony that officially made Adm. Linda Fagan the first female officer in charge of an U.S. armed service branch.

"She will be the first woman to serve as commandant of the Coast Guard, the first woman [to lead] any branch to the United States armed forces, and it's about time," Biden said. "The secretary of defense, when he

sent me the name, I said, 'What in the hell took you so long?'"

Fagan replaced Adm. Karl Schultz as commandant.

It's not the first time that Fagan has been the first woman to break a barrier in the military. Last year, she became the first female four-star admiral in the Coast Guard when Biden appointed her as the service's vice commandant.

The 1985 Coast Guard Academy graduate previously served as commander of the Coast Guard Pacific Area, overseeing all Coast Guard missions from

the Rocky Mountains to the East Coast of Africa, according to the service.

Fagan is also the service's first-ever Gold Ancient Trident, which is the officer with the longest service record in the marine safety field, according to the Coast Guard.

"Today is about you," she told the Coast Guard members at the ceremony. "I'm honored and humbled to serve as your commandant. Thank you for your dedication, your hard work and your service. It's my greatest privilege to work on your behalf."

Fagan was 16 when she arrived at the Coast Guard Academy in 1981, just five years after the first women were allowed to attend the school, she said during the ceremony.

At the time, only 8% of the academy's students were women, Biden said. Now, women make up about 40% of the student body.

Schultz, who has served as Coast Guard commandant since 2018, will retire — nearly 40 years after he graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in 1983, he said during the ceremony.

Top 2 Naval Justice School officers fired

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy has fired the top two officers in charge of the Naval Justice School in Newport, R.I., after an investigation into the unit's morale, according to the service.

Capt. Amy Larson, the commanding officer, and Lt. Col. Bret Swaim, the executive officer, were relieved from their positions Tuesday "due to a loss of confidence in their ability to command."

"Larson and Swaim were relieved following an assessment of the current NJS climate," the Navy said in a statement. "Neither officer was involved in misconduct."

Rear Adm. David Wilson, the top officer in charge of the Naval Legal Service Command, made the decision to relieve Larson and Swaim, according to the Navy.

"Larson has served as NJS commanding officer, and also as the Judge Advocate General's special assistant for training,

since Sept. 10," the service said. "Swaim has served in various roles at NJS since the summer of 2020."

The school trains Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard enlisted and civilian personnel "in all aspects of military law" for professions in the military legal system, according to its website.

"[Larson and Swaim's] relief will not impact the NJS mission or execution of its training schedule," the Navy said.

Wilson appointed Capt. Mark Klein, the school's deputy commander, as interim commanding officer, and Cmdr. Abigail Myers, the NJS's operations officer, as acting executive officer.

The legal service command is now working with the Marine Corps to identify permanent replacements for Larson and Swaim.

"Larson has been temporarily reassigned to NLSC headquarters," the Navy said. "Swaim's new assignment has not yet been named."

Women veterans take part in Honor Flight

BY SARA SAMORA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — It took almost three years to make happen, but 109 women veterans from Florida were finally able to visit the nation's capital and see memorials that honor those who served.

"I think they've been overlooked for a long time, and we found on past Honor Flights, we've had very, very few females apply," said Liza Diana Walters, Honor Flight Villages' flight director. "We take at the most, a couple per flight, so I hope that this will raise awareness for the female vets and encourage them to come on Honor Flights."

The Honor Flight network is an organization that flies veterans to visit memorials in Washington free of charge. For Honor Flight Villages in Florida, it was the first time the organization flew an all-female Honor Flight.

Walters said the Tri-County Women Veterans approached

Honor Flight Villages in 2019 to ask whether the group would organize an all-female flight.

The group had been scheduled to visit in May 2020, but the coronavirus pandemic caused the Honor Flights to shut down for two years. Now that the all-female flight has come to fruition, Walters said they hope it will draw attention to the contributions of women veterans.

On the Honor Flight's first day in Washington, the veterans toured the Navy Museum as their first stop. Later, they visited the World War II Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial.

Connie Plotkin, 74, joined the Air Force in 1969 as a medical technician. She served five years and attended nursing school. She then commissioned into the Army Reserve in 1984 and retired in 2008.

"I had to get out because I was of age," Plotkin said of her time in the service. "I was 60, so they made me get out. But I love my military career. It was the highlight of my life."

Poll: Gen Z unaware of Army career benefits

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Young adult Americans think they know a lot about Army life, but a newly released cross-generational survey showing otherwise is giving the service impetus to fill in the knowledge gaps amid a recruitment crisis.

“The Army has what Gen Z is looking for in an employer. They just don’t know it yet,” Maj. Gen. Alex Fink, chief of Army enterprise marketing, said in a statement issued Wednesday.

The Know Your Army national consumer survey found that 73% of respondents ages 18 to 25 claimed familiarity with the Ar-

my, the highest level of any generation polled. But survey participants in that age group turned out to be largely unaware of what the Army can offer them.

More than half of Generation Z respondents did not realize that soldiers can receive benefits such as tuition assistance and the possibility of earning full college tuition. Regarding early retirement benefits, only 31% were in the know.

Another misconception about Army life for 30% of Generation Z polled is that the majority of jobs available to soldiers are combat-related, the Army said.

The survey was conducted by

the Army in March across a sample of 3,000 U.S. adults between the ages of 18 and 76. No margin of error was listed.

Top brass has previously sounded alarms over the service’s difficulty finding qualified recruits in that 18-25 age range.

“We are in a war for talent,” Gen. James McConville, the Army chief of staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in May.

The release of the polling data comes as the service touts a new advertising campaign that talks up the wide range of benefits associated with military life.

Instead of highlighting soldiers

in the field, the “Know Your Army” ads call attention to pension plans, mortgage loan perks and free schooling. The aim is to show how such privileges set the Army apart from civilian employers.

Given the difficult recruiting environment, which military officials have blamed in part on a competitive labor market, the Army’s 2023 budget request calls for an end-strength of 473,000 active-duty soldiers, even though Congress has authorized the force to grow to 500,000 by 2022. Military officials have said that the cap is temporary and that the Army intends to grow once the recruiting environment improves.

New Navy flat-deck ship visits 7th Fleet homeport

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy’s newest flat-deck amphibious assault ship steamed into Tokyo Bay on Sunday, the second port visit of its maiden deployment in the Indo-Pacific.

The USS Tripoli arrived at Yokosuka, homeport of the 7th Fleet, for a “brief visit,” ship spokesman Lt. Davis Anderson told Stars and Stripes by email Wednesday. The Tripoli was still at Yokosuka as of Thursday; Anderson declined to comment on its expected length of stay due to security concerns.

The 855-foot flat-deck left its San Diego homeport for its maiden deployment May 2, just under two years after its July 2020 commissioning, according to the Navy.

The ship is with the 7th Fleet to work with U.S. allies and “serves as a ready response force to defend peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region,” Davis said.

While in Yokosuka, the ship’s crew is cleared for liberty both on and off base, 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Mark Langford told Stars and Stripes in a Wednesday email.

Davis said all necessary COVID-19 mitigation efforts have been taken, adding that all Tripoli sailors are vaccinated and that they are “excited to experience Yokosuka.”

The Tripoli’s port call comes one week after the ship concluded a two-day stop at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni on May 22.

While there, the ship took on 232 Marines from Marine Wing Communication Squadron 171, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121, Marine Aircraft Group 12, and Marine Air Logistics Squadron 12, according to a May 20 news release from the Tripoli.

The America-class amphibious assault ship has an expanded hangar bay instead of a well deck, to accommodate the Marine Corps’ F-35B stealth fighters that are capable of short takeoffs and vertical landings. Dubbed a “Lightning carrier,” the Tripoli in April loaded 16 F-35s, breaking a record for the number of fighters aboard an amphibious assault vessel, according to USNI News.

The ship can also carry MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotors and a variety of helicopters such as the MH-60S Seahawk.

USFJ eases its off-base, outdoor mask mandate

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Another vestige of pandemic life for the U.S. military in Japan is giving way as commands across the country relax their off-base mask mandates.

U.S. Forces Japan has amended its health protection order to permit its population to go maskless outdoors where individuals can maintain six feet of social distance. Masks are still required indoors, except while eating and drinking, and on public transportation, including bus and train stations and airports.

“The off-base mask wear guidance is in alignment with the Government of Japan’s guidelines issued in May,” USFJ spokeswoman Lt. Col. Brooke Brander told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

Japan’s guidelines are somewhat more relaxed. They encourage people to remove their masks during the summer to prevent heatstroke, according to public broadcaster NHK on Tuesday. The Japanese are not expected to wear masks even indoors where they can maintain six feet between them and little or no con-

versation is taking place, according to the NHK report. Japan, however, still requires masks in crowded places, hospitals, nursing homes and during rush hour on public transportation.

Masks have been the most visible sign of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, if not the most controversial. Most people in Tokyo, for example, continue to wear them. U.S. military bases dropped the mask mandate on their installations months ago, with exceptions for medical facilities, among other places.

Mask mandates were loosened Wednesday by Naval Forces Japan, headquartered at Yokosuka Naval Base south of Tokyo, and Yokota Air Base, the airlift hub in western Tokyo where USFJ and 5th Air Force are based.

The health protection condition is now at Alpha, one step above a routine public health condition that signifies a “limited health alert.” And restriction of movement for travelers now applies only to new arrivals who did not take a take a molecular test — PCR, for example — for COVID-19, before traveling, according to USFJ.

House taking up gun bill after shootings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House is swiftly working to put its stamp on gun legislation in response to mass shootings in Texas and New York by 18-year-old assailants who used semi-automatic rifles to kill 31 people, including 19 children.

Debate on the legislation came as the White House announced that President Joe Biden would give a prime-time speech about the shootings and his plans to press Congress “to pass commonsense laws to combat the epidemic of gun violence that is taking lives every day.”

Partisan positions were clear at a Judiciary Committee hearing Thursday on legislation that would raise the age limit for purchasing semi-automatic rifles from 18 to 21. The bill would also make it a federal offense to import, manufacture or possess large-capacity magazines and would create a grant program to buy back such magazines.

It builds on the administration’s executive action banning fast-action “bump-stock” devices and “ghost guns” that are as-

sembled without serial numbers.

The Democratic legislation, called the Protecting Our Kids Act, was quickly added to the legislative docket after last week’s school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. A vote by the full House could come as early as next week. With Republicans nearly all in opposition, however, the House action will mostly be symbolic, merely putting lawmakers on record about gun control ahead of this year’s elections. The Senate is taking a different course, with a bipartisan group striving toward a compromise on gun safety legislation that can win enough GOP support to become law. Those talks are making “rapid progress,” according to Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, one of the Republican negotiators.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York, the Democratic chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, defended his chamber’s proposals Thursday as popular with most Americans. He dismissed Republican criticism.

“You say that it is too soon to take action? That we are ‘politicizing’ these tragedies to

enact new policies?” Nadler said. “It has been 23 years since Columbine. Fifteen years since Virginia Tech. Ten years since Sandy Hook. Seven years since Charleston. Four years since Parkland and Santa Fe and Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

“Too soon? My friends, what the hell are you waiting for?”

Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, the ranking Republican on the committee, said no one wants another tragedy. But he insisted the House bill would do nothing to stop mass shootings.

“We need to get serious about understanding why this keeps happening,” Jordan said. “Until we figure out the why, we will always mourn losses without facing the problem. Our job is to figure out the why.”

A chief feature of the House bill requires those buying semi-automatic weapons to be at least 21. Only six states require someone to be at least 21 years old to buy rifles and shotguns. The shooters in Uvalde and Buffalo, N.Y., were both 18 and used an AR-15-style weapon.

Biden says he wasn’t told at start of formula woes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Wednesday that he was not briefed on the prospect of nationwide shortages of infant formula for about two months, and he acknowledged the strain on families as his administration struggles to address the situation.

Yet company executives at a meeting Biden hosted from the White House told the president they knew the substantial impact that the shutdown of a major production plant in February would have on the U.S. supply almost immediately.

“They did, but I didn’t,” Biden told reporters later, saying

he was not made aware of the severity until early April.

The delay, unexplained by Biden or White House aides, undercut the administration’s efforts to demonstrate he has been on top of a problem that has compounded stress and economic difficulties for families with young children at a time

when Americans are already struggling with inflation.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre insisted the administration began working to address the crisis within days of the plant’s closure, but could not explain the delay in raising the issue to Biden.

Corinthian students see federal student debt erased

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hundreds of thousands of students who attended the for-profit Corinthian Colleges chain will automatically get their federal student loans canceled, the Biden administration announced, a move that aims to bring closure to one of the most notorious cases of fraud in American higher education.

Under the new action,

anyone who attended the now-defunct chain from its founding in 1995 to its collapse in 2015 will get their federal student debt wiped clean. It will erase \$5.8 billion in debt for more than 560,000 borrowers, the largest single loan discharge in Education Department history, according to the agency.

“As of today, every student deceived, defrauded and driven into debt by Corinthian

Colleges can rest assured that the Biden-Harris Administration has their back and will discharge their federal student loans,” Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said Wednesday. “For far too long, Corinthian engaged in the wholesale financial exploitation of students, misleading them into taking on more and more debt to pay for promises they would never keep.”

Tens of thousands of former

Corinthian students were already eligible for debt cancellation, but they had to file paperwork and navigate an application process that advocates have said is confusing. Now, the relief will be made automatic and extended to additional borrowers. Those who have a remaining balance on their Corinthian debt will also get refunds on payments they have already made, Education Department officials said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

After small-plane crash, pilot hitches a ride

CT SIMSBURY — Investigators are looking into why a small plane crashed in a farm near a small Connecticut airport, where authorities found the wreckage empty. It turned out that the uninjured pilot had gotten a ride home in another aircraft.

The single-engine Piper PA-28 apparently overshot a runway sometime Tuesday evening at the Simsbury Airport, near Hartford. The crash wasn't reported until the farm owner came upon the wreckage in a greenhouse near the end of the runway around 8:30 p.m., Simsbury Fire Chief James Baldis told reporters.

He said authorities eventually determined that the pilot had been dropping off his plane for service and had someone else following him in a different plane, which picked him up after the wreck.

"He's perfectly OK. Unfortunately, he just didn't report the fact that this had happened," Baldis said.

The Federal Aviation Administration is investigating.

Man making fireworks at his home dies after blast

HI PAHOA — Hawaii police and federal authorities are investigating after a man building homemade fireworks died following an explosion at his house.

Police on the Big Island said Tuesday the man was severely injured by an explosion early Saturday at his home in the Puna district. The man was flown

to a Honolulu hospital, where he died, police said.

When police arrived at the home, the 35-year-old man was lying on the floor with a wound to his abdomen area. His wife and children were asleep but woke up because of the explosion shortly after 2 a.m. The man had been making homemade fireworks at the time, police said.

Police found materials used to make fireworks, several guns and 214 marijuana plants.

The exact cause of the explosion is under investigation.

Police: Woman escaping traffic stop struck officer

CA PORTERVILLE — A California woman was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder after authorities said she hit a police officer with her car while trying to get away during a traffic stop.

Police in Porterville said they pulled over Monyka McDarment for unspecified vehicle equipment violations. During the stop, McDarment refused to state her name, fought police and then struck an officer when she sped away from the scene, officials said.

She was caught after ditching her car and leading police on a short foot chase. Officers said they found three ounces of methamphetamine in her car that were individually packaged for sale.

McDarment, 41, could face additional charges including assault with a deadly weapon on a police officer, felony evasion, possession of meth for sale and transportation of meth for sale, KBAC-TV reported

The officer McDarment was

accused of hitting was treated at a hospital and released, according to the news station.

Body found in gator-filled lake near disc golf course

FL LARGO — A man died searching for Frisbees in a lake at a disc golf course where people are warned by signs to beware of alligators, police in Florida said Tuesday.

The unidentified man was looking for flying discs in the water and "a gator was involved," the Largo Police Department said in an email Tuesday.

The man who died was 47 years old, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said in an email. The commission said a contracted specialist was working to remove an alligator from the lake "and efforts will be made to determine if it was involved in this situation."

The park's website notes that patrons can "discover the sport of disc golf on a course set in the natural beauty of this park." The course is set along the lake, which has no-swimming signs posted along it.

People who frequent the disc course said it's not unusual for someone to look for lost discs that can be sold for a few dollars.

Bear safely removed from tree near state Capitol

NY ALBANY — A black bear wandered into Albany, climbed a tree several blocks from the state Capitol and rested on branches about 30 feet up Tuesday before

workers tranquilized the animal and caught it in a net.

The bear plunged into the net in the early afternoon after a state wildlife crew used a fire department ladder truck to get in close to immobilize the animal. The bear had climbed a towering pine tree on the edge of Washington Park in a residential neighborhood about a half mile from the Capitol.

Police said the bear would be medically evaluated before being released into a forested area of the Catskills, south of the city.

Bison gores woman who approached in Yellowstone

WY YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK — A bison gores a 25-year-old woman in Yellowstone National Park.

The bison was walking near a boardwalk at Black Sand Basin, just north of Old Faithful, when the woman approached it on Monday, according to a park statement. She got within 10 feet before the animal gores her and tossed her 10 feet into the air. The woman from Grove City, Ohio, sustained a puncture wound and other injuries.

Park emergency medical providers responded and transported her via ambulance to a hospital in Idaho.

Park officials say it's the first reported bison goring this year. The park statement said bison are unpredictable, have injured more people in Yellowstone than any other animal and can run three times faster than humans.

Park regulations require visitors to remain more than 25 yards away from bison.

— From wire reports

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Rangers rout Bolts in East finals opener

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Filip Chytil has found his scoring touch and it's helping the New York Rangers get on quite a roll.

Chytil scored twice in the second period and the Rangers routed the two-time defending Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay Lightning 6-2 on Wednesday night in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals.

After scoring eight goals in 67 games during the regular season, the 22-year-old center has seven in 15 playoff games — including five goals in the past three.

"I was working hard for the whole season," Chytil said. "There were tough moments, so many chances but I couldn't put it in the net. ... When you're not putting pucks to the net you're not helping the team that much and maybe start to be a little frustrated. But now it's finally going in, I am so happy I can help the team like this in winning the games."

Mika Zibanejad, Artemi Panarin and Frank Vatrano each had a goal and an assist, Chris Kreider also scored and Alexis Lafrenière and Adam Fox each had two assists to help New York win its franchise-record seventh consecutive home playoff game. Igor Shesterkin stopped 37 shots to improve to 8-3 in the past 11 games.

The Rangers have scored 17 goals while winning their past three games after scoring a total of nine in the previous five.

"There was a lot of sharpness," Rangers coach Gerard Gallant said. "Obviously, (the Lightning) were a little bit rusty tonight, they weren't the same after nine days off. ... Our game's good, we're playing well, we're doing the right things now. We just got to continue to do that."

Steven Stamkos had a goal and an assist, and Ondrej Palat also scored for Tampa Bay, which had won six straight and was playing for the first time

since completing its second-round sweep of Florida on May 23. Andrei Vasilevskiy, who gave up only three goals in four games against the Panthers, had 28 saves.

"You've got to give them credit. They are a really good hockey team," Stamkos said. "We certainly didn't have our best. I think we know what we have to do better. Been in this position before. I am confident we will have a better effort next game. It's Game 1 of a long series."

Game 2 is Friday night at Madison Square Garden.

The score was tied 1-1 after 20 minutes before the Rangers took control in the second period.

Vatrano gave the Rangers a 2-1 lead at 7:50 of the second as he fired a shot from the left circle past Vasilevskiy high on the blocker side for his fourth of the postseason.

Palat tied it at 8:32, backhanding the rebound of a shot by

Stamkos past Shesterkin for his fifth of the playoffs.

The Rangers regained the lead 1:19 later. Kaapo Kakko brought the puck from behind the Lightning net to the goalie's right and sent a pass to Chytil in the slot that he fired past Vasilevskiy. It marked the third consecutive game Chytil scored.

Chytil made it 4-2 with 4:17 left as he got a cross-ice pass from K'Andre Miller and fired a one-timer past Vasilevskiy for his seventh of the postseason — and fifth in three games.

Panarin got a cross-ice pass from Andrew Copp in the left circle on a 2-on-1 and fired it past Vasilevskiy to give the Rangers a three-goal lead 30 seconds into the third. It was his fifth of the playoffs.

With much of the focus coming into this series centered on the goalies, the Madison Square Garden crowd began chants of "I-gor's bet-ter! I-gor's bet-ter!" midway through the third period.

Gauff, 18, advances to French final vs. No. 1 Swiatek

Associated Press

PARIS — Coco Gauff sat plain-faced in her French Open changeover chair after moving one set away from her first Grand Slam final at 18 — just 18! — and calmly snacked on some cut-up pieces of pineapple and other fruit, seemingly without a care in the world.

Her opponent in Thursday's semifinals at Roland Garros, Martina Trevisan, was taking a medical timeout so her right thigh could be treated and taped by a trainer. It was the sort of delay that might rattle some players, might make them slow down, relinquish momentum, think too much about what's at stake.

Not Gauff. Not on this sunny, breezy afternoon at Court Philippe Chatrier. When the American arrived in Paris, she

celebrated her recent high school graduation by posing for cap-and-gown photos near the Eiffel Tower while holding her diploma. After wrapping up a 6-3, 6-1 victory over the 59th-ranked Trevisan, Gauff will be back in that stadium on Saturday to face No. 1 Iga Swiatek for the championship.

Swiatek, who won the 2020 French Open, is on a 34-match winning streak after eliminating No. 20 Daria Kasatkina 6-2, 6-1 on Thursday.

"I'm in a mindset now like: 'It doesn't matter.' I mean, I'm going to be happy, regardless. My parents are going to love me, regardless. So I'm just going to go into it like another match," the 18th-seeded Gauff said. "I mean, yeah, it's a Grand Slam final, but there are so many things going on in the

world right now, and especially in the U.S. a lot of stuff is happening right now, so I think it's not important to stress over a tennis match."

And then, in a message referring to the recent series of mass shootings in her home country, Gauff wrote in marker on a courtside TV camera: "Peace. End gun violence."

A willingness to speak out about issues of significance, and a wide-lens view of the world, reflect the sort of maturity that has served her well, especially with so much attention from such a young age. She won the French Open junior title at 14. She became the youngest qualifier in Wimbledon history and then beat Venus Williams on the way to the fourth round there at 15.

Gauff, who turned 18 in

March, is the youngest finalist at the clay-court major tournament since 2001, when Kim Clijsters was the runner-up a day after her 18th birthday.

"I'm a little bit in shock right now," Gauff said with a chuckle after using her still-improving forehand to open up the court and her long-terrific backhand to seal points against Trevisan. "I didn't know how to react at the end of the match. I have no words to describe how I feel."

Gauff has won all 12 sets she has played over the past two weeks. She did not need to navigate the most arduous path to get this far: Because of all manner of surprising results and early exits by top players from the bracket, she has faced only one seeded foe so far, No. 31 Elise Mertens.

Celtics' run validates Udoka's vision

Associated Press

The Boston Celtics' transition from a team that went from sitting just outside the top tier of the Eastern Conference to being four wins away from the franchise's 18th championship began the moment Ime Udoka grasped the microphone at his introductory news conference last June.

Flanked by the Celtics' co-owners and new president of basketball operations Brad Stevens, the first-time coach was asked what kind of stamp he hoped to put on his new team.

A smile on his face, Udoka didn't hesitate to point out a shortcoming of his predecessor and new boss.

"We want to have a well-rounded team. I looked at the numbers overall, sorry to mention this Brad, but 27th in assists last year — we want to have more team basketball there," Udoka said.

A year later, his pledge to build a culture on sharing the ball, accountability and gritty defense is no longer just an aspiration.

It's the foundation of a team that's back in the NBA Finals for the first time since 2010 and has Udoka on the cusp of becoming just the 10th coach to win a title in his first season.

Tyrone Lue (2016 Cleveland Cavaliers) is on that list, while Hall of Famer Bill Russell just missed it, winning the first of back-to-back titles his second season as a player-coach with Boston in 1968.

Like Udoka, who is of Nigerian descent, they are both Black coaches who carved out their places in a league in which coaches of color have often had to wait for opportunities on the sideline.

That is even more underlined in a city like Boston with its complicated racial history, where Udoka can also join Russell, Doc Rivers (2008) and K.C. Jones (1984, 1986) as Black coaches to raise the Larry O'Brien Trophy.

It took a while for Udoka's first team to buy in after typical challenges like injuries were complicated more by unexpected absences due to COVID-19.

It added up to a team that was nowhere close to playoff bound following a buzzer-beating loss to the New York Knicks on Jan. 6, dropping the Celtics to an 18-21 record and 11th place in the Eastern Conference.

But following a 33-10 run to close the regular season, and wins over the Brooklyn Nets, defending champion Milwaukee Bucks and top-seeded Miami Heat in the first three rounds of the playoffs, here the Celtics are clearly a team built in Udoka's image and driven by his leadership.

"He's taught us things that we could learn and we taught him things," point guard Marcus Smart said. "We knew that him being his first time, it wasn't going to be easy. It was going to be hard. That's just how it is, and that's just the team we are, and that's the mentality we picked up from him. ... When you've got a coach like that, it's kind of hard not to follow."

Udoka has benefited from what he heard from core players like Jayson Tatum, Jay-

len Brown, Smart and even veteran Al Horford, who early on expressed a desire to be pushed and called out if necessary.

As the Celtics return to the Finals, Udoka is adamant that this group hasn't reached its peak.

Moments before he addressed the team in the locker room after clinching the conference title, he noticed the players grinning and all clutching water bottles.

"What's that?" he asked. "We already did the water bottle thing earlier in the year."

The team showered him with water, anyway, refusing to allow their coach to dodge enjoying the moment, if only for a second.

As Udoka stood dripping wet, the widest of smiles on his face, he quickly refocused his team's attention to its unfinished task.

"First of all, we don't hang banners for Eastern Conference championships in this organization," Udoka said. "So ain't no need for the water celebration. We've got bigger plans."

Names listed for Saudi golf league; battle lines drawn

Associated Press

DUBLIN, Ohio — The first Saudi-funded LIV Golf Invitational has Dustin Johnson and 12 other PGA Tour members in its 48-man field next week outside London. The next move falls to the PGA Tour, which must decide whether to allow them to come back.

The first fallout after the rival league released the names of players who will compete at its inaugural event came Wednesday when the Royal Bank of Canada said it was dropping Johnson and Graeme McDowell as corporate sponsors. Both are playing the LIV event, the same week as the RBC Canadian Open on the PGA Tour.

The PGA Tour's only comment was to mention a May 10 memo to players in which it denied releases for them to play the first LIV event. "Members who violate the tournament regulations are subject to disciplinary action," the statement said.

Matt Jones and Hudson Swafford were among the 42 players named on the field list (six other spots are being held for a special invitation and from an Asian Tour series). Neither ever had more attention from media as they practiced Wednesday before and after the pro-am at the Memorial.

Jones confirmed he received a signing bonus and is obligated to play multiple times among the

eight LIV events, each with \$25 million in prize money and \$4 million to the individual winner. Five of the tournaments are in the U.S.

The 41-year-old Australian, who is No. 68 in the world, said it was a "good choice for me" for business and family and what he hopes will grow the game.

The Daily Telegraph reported Wednesday that Johnson was offered more than \$100 million just to sign up for the league Greg Norman is running. Johnson has been heavily recruited, and it was thought the courtship was over when he said in February he was "fully committed" to the PGA Tour. He was the biggest star on the list of 42 players.

Phil Mickelson, the chief recruiter of players until his inflammatory remarks about the Saudis and the PGA Tour caused him to step away from golf, was not on the list. He still could be added to the field.

Swafford, a 34-year-old from Florida who has two young children and is ranked No. 91 in the world, mentioned the appeal of team golf as part of the new league and less travel. He also wanted to stay part of the PGA Tour.

"Suspending players? That's not growing the game of golf. That's what LIV is trying to do — give more opportunities to more golfers," Swafford said. "I think it's going to be a great thing."

Verlander, Astros complete sweep of A's

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Justin Verlander took a no-hitter into the seventh inning, Yordan Álvarez cleared the bases with a go-ahead double in the ninth and the Houston Astros beat the Oakland Athletics 5-4 on Wednesday to complete a three-game sweep.

Elvis Andrus broke up Verlander's no-hit bid with an RBI double in the seventh inning that tied the game at 1. Christian Bethancourt followed with a two-run homer, his first drive since 2016, to give Oakland a 3-1 lead.

Houston responded with four runs in the ninth, keyed by Álvarez's three-run double. Aledmys Díaz and Alex Bregman also drove in runs for the Astros, who won their fourth in a row.

Verlander came within seven outs of his fourth career no-hitter, which would have tied Sandy Koufax for second-most in MLB history behind only Nolan Ryan's seven. He also lost a no-hitter in the eighth inning against Minnesota on May 10, a sign the two-time Cy Young Award winner is back in prime

form following Tommy John surgery that sidelined him for all of the 2021 season.

"Bittersweet, I guess," Verlander said. "I mean, we won. I had a good game until really one pitch. Andrus' hit doesn't really bother me, but the homer subsequent to that is one I'd really like to have back. Just a hanging curveball up and away."

Pirates 8, Dodgers 4: Bryan Reynolds hit a two-run homer in the fifth inning, Rodolfo Castro drove in four runs in three innings, and Pittsburgh completed its first sweep at Los Angeles in nearly 22 years.

The NL West-leading Dodgers were swept for the first time this season.

Mets 5, Nationals 0: Tomás Nido went 4-for-4 with three RBIs at the bottom of the batting order, and Carlos Carrasco combined with three relievers on host New York's second consecutive shutout to finish a perfect homestand.

Phillies 6, Giants 5: Kyle Schwarber and Nick Maton homered to help host Philadelphia snap a five-game losing streak

with a victory over San Francisco.

Cardinals 5, Padres 2: Nolan Arenado hit a two-run homer and drove in three, Dakota Hudson threw seven strong innings and host St. Louis beat San Diego to complete a three-game sweep.

Blue Jays 7, White Sox 3: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit a two-run homer, Danny Jansen added a three-run blast, and host Toronto won its seventh straight, its longest streak since an eight-game run last September.

Rays 4, Rangers 3 (11): Ji-Man Choi hit an RBI double in the 11th inning to give visiting Tampa Bay a win over Texas.

Red Sox 7, Reds 1: Garrett Whitlock pitched six strong innings and Jackie Bradley Jr. drove in four runs to help host Boston beat Cincinnati.

Guardians 4, Royals 0: Rookie left-hander Konnor Pilkington struck out eight in five innings for his first major league win and host Cleveland completed a three-game sweep.

Orioles 9, Mariners 2: Ryan Mountcastle and Ramón Urías

hit two of Baltimore's four homers with back-to-back shots in the sixth inning to cruise past visiting Seattle.

Tigers 5, Twins 0: Tarik Skubal allowed just two hits in seven innings in host Detroit's win over Minnesota.

Marlins 14-12, Rockies 1-13 (10): Brendan Rodgers hit three home runs, including a two-run walkoff drive in the 10th inning, to help host Colorado top Miami in the second game of a doubleheader, earning the split.

In the first game, rookie right-hander Edward Cabrera (1-0) took a no-hitter into the sixth inning and struck out nine to earn his first big league win.

Braves 6, Diamondbacks 0: Austin Riley hit a three-run homer, William Contreras had three hits — including two of visiting Atlanta's five doubles — and Kyle Wright threw six scoreless innings.

Cubs 4, Brewers 3 (10): Rookie Christopher Morel drove in Jason Heyward with a sacrifice fly in the 10th inning in host Chicago's win over Milwaukee.

SEC weighs whether to expand conference schedule

Associated Press

DESTIN, Fla. — The Southeastern Conference's slogan, "It just means more," could soon refer to the number of football games the league schedules.

SEC coaches and athletic directors have been meeting this week at a resort on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Atop the agenda is whether the conference schedule should expand from eight to nine games when the league itself grows from 14 to 16 teams with the additions of Texas and Oklahoma.

Whether a decision comes by the time the spring meetings wrap up Friday is still to be determined — and seeming more unlikely at the end of Wednes-

day's sessions.

"We've got some questions still to answer," Commissioner Greg Sankey said. "We've got more work to do."

The SEC presidents, who have final say on schedule change, meet Thursday with the ADs. Sankey said the executive committee would be updated on the discussions and the conference was in no rush to make a decision, but would not commit to whether the group would vote.

"Wait till Friday," he said.

Even those in the conference who have generally been supportive of playing more league games acknowledge it's a move that comes with potential com-

plications.

"Eight has worked very well for our conference," Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne said Wednesday. "You've seen how we've scheduled (for future seasons) and we've added Power Five, Autonomy Five, games to our schedule. Now we did that based off of thinking we were going to continue to play eight games."

The scheduling model choices have been whittled down to two: Nine games with three permanent rivals for each team and six opponents that would rotate over a four-year cycle or a model more similar to what the SEC uses now — eight games with one annual rivalry and the other

seven opponents rotating.

Regardless of the number of games the SEC plays among itself, Sankey said this week the league is heading toward scrapping its divisional format when Oklahoma and Texas jump on board.

The Big 12 schools are currently scheduled to join the SEC in 2025. The Longhorns and Sooners are contractually bound to the Big 12 until then and it could cost tens of millions of dollars to break the deal even a year early.

Even though the SEC might not implement a new format until 2025, a decision needs to come fairly soon so its schools can adjust.